

For Your Own Good

Isn't it a wonder, the way someone fills you up? Feasts on the least of you? She knocked on the hollow part of me, a master craftsman with shutters for eyes. With little more than night's breath and panty's breadth between me and her that time and she kneaded my hip to a bruise and sloppily hummed "Blue in Green" while I shivered and learned some things.

Her bright lipstick lingered everywhere, on the steam-roller bong, the end of her cigarettes. Once she left her mouth mark on my earlobe which really required some explaining.

On the bottom of the tube: *Matte Finish*, then *BRAZEN*.

So. It was me who always ate the jelly beans she stashed in her glove box and it was me who stole her quarters to call a guy.

It was him who made her want to die. At least she said it was. She had a loose relationship with telling.

Another time she painted our toe nails black and plucked my eyebrows super thin like Anaïs Nin's. Man did I want her to love me but I just couldn't balance all that fear and feasting on my fingertip. I told her how the deep divot between her nose and lip drove me delirious, and she laughed, named it a philtrum. Sometimes she put hickeys on me in hidden places. Sometimes she put her feet in my lap when I drove.

She left early one morning, I watched her go. She put on her long dark skirt and peplum jacket, rolled her hair into a ballet bun and shed our yesterday like a too small snake skin.

The Oracle Squints

She hears the clack of my prayer beads
I want lips sliding across my collarbone
She understands my lack and longing
I know who governs my neck and throat

I light candles
leave offerings
ink drawings wrapped in my hair
poems written small
 things that drip with
meaning drown in feeling
 things of touch and taste
and reason

I feel wanton but buttoned
so I turn on the night music
loud and honey-slow
start a fire to bring
a little atmosphere
in here

my shadow shivers on the wall

my feet are bare
these stones are cold
everyone is hungry

Some burn incense
to please a goddess
I sacrifice words
to woo

her

Ghost Towns

Last spring your neighbor's cat laid a baby rabbit
on your front steps, a tribute bloody and very
much alive.

It's suffering
I sobbed.

Your face solemn, you told me
Go inside, Hummingbird.

I loved your country boy know-how then
your mercy
and when I shook off my city girl shock I kissed you so
long and hard your mouth bruised
like fruit.

But now I only have this map.

I left at dusk, bought some cheap whiskey and a six pack of beer
drove all night and made it here with stars to spare
so I parked
and drank the sun awake.

Take exit 148 toward Luther

I distrust this small hush, the lavender horizon now burning pink, too perfect
to be real. Windows down, air already
so hot it hurts. My car rumbles a sad thrum over the gravel.

Turn left onto Hogback Rd

Sweat licks down my neck.

Summer finds these back roads rutted by drought. Red dirt dust stirs lazy
in the molten August morning—everything sticks
but nothing stays.

Pottawatomie Rd turns right

A sort-of understanding dawns at golden hour:

Fallis spelled in rock on a hillock. If you were here I would laugh
and tell you I chose to visit this place first for three reasons:

poets and quiet and cock

and I think

You had southern rocker locks, wore aviator sunglasses like a traffic cop.

Your sublime southern drawl hinted
at drowsy Sunday afternoons and boozy

back porch kisses. Of simple comfort,
of limbs tangled in too warm sheets. Of swamps
and sweat and Jack. Of black magic and voodoo berries. Your voice
like pecan pie.

I could only ignore those promises for so long.

One day you looked long at my hands, at my curls breeze blown.

You said
*You look like a radioactive Pre-Raphaelite, all hands
and eyes and hair.*

Grinned around the lit Camel cigarette held in your teeth. Unabashed.
So of course I took you home. Tasted the sun without
burning my tongue and made you a habit.
You whispered tales of wild things. Afraid I might run.
Sometimes we just drove, took black and white photos of
Oklahoma ghost towns
and old gravestones. The best has you leaning against a pleading
angel, squinting,
a toothpick pointing jaunty from your smile. You caught
me candid that same day, hazy daylight roaring through my cotton sundress
and my legs backlit. I lifted that skirt later and rode you
before the ride home,
my hair in your mouth.

Take the 1st right onto 3rd St
From the heavy trees an aggressive mailbox juts out
forward and to the left
like a boxer's jaw twisted and ruined:
A. Whittaker Red Fox 1034
An address long abandoned, hidden by overgrowth. Shadows dapple
the silvered eaves, and the wood shingles,
shaped like dragon scales, have gone
to stone.

I push open the door, certain
now that all this honeyed peace is just bait on a trap. Inside, a wingback chair
flower fabric rotted away
sits in a thrust of sunshine.
Maybe you caused all this damage
too. A pan on the stove
a canister of salt on the countertop.
Mrs. Whittaker washed coffee mugs one morning
lined them up on the window sill to dry
but she's gone now, some apocalypse,

maybe, some rapture come to claim the blameless
and I'm still here.

Take exit 157 for OK-33

Noon and the searing wind seethes,
slaps my cheeks red and oh lord all the booze
has caught up my head pounding
with heat and hangover and something else
something like fear.

Turn right onto Coyote Trail

On to Centralia, where a shell of a home stands
its west wall intact
a crocheted potholder faded to dull yellows dangles from a nail
the wallpaper bears pale scars where
framed pictures once hung.

Slight right to stay on E 160 Rd

I find a huge snakeskin in a church vestibule and soda cans
in the baptismal. Open a hymnal
to page seventy-three. Despite the dim I feel
see-through in this place and some angry weight makes me run
away with a thudding heart.

Take the 3rd left onto W Grand Ave

Another house.

This one has suffered
bricks broken

walls scorched.

A mattress reduced to rusty springs shoved in the fireplace.

Beneath a window sits a claw-footed
tub filled with scat and shards of glass.

Turn left onto E0740 Rd

Today I've seen suits under thick layers of dust lined up neat in a closet
found a wedding album
buried in rubble. No great catastrophe.

Just time.

As I drive I'm listening loud to songs with fiddles
harmony and heartache.

Hiwassee Road declares a hand-painted sign, white on black.

Which is where I take my last right past a barn
smashed gray and silent
under a felled oak, my tank top sweated through—

but my eyes dry in the rearview.

Yes, loving me was a lonesome business. I saw your stillness as beautiful yet
I could not be still.

From the bed you said

Come here, Hummingbird

your face so bright I turned away. True,
your mouth was nectar, so I rubbed
gardenia petals into the pulse
of my throat.
Hummed a paean to you as I turned out the light.

Such solace, for a little while.

Yesterday morning
I watched your broad
back in sleep
a gentle up and down.
The curtains stirred and the open air felt like a failed spell,
heavy with cause
or maybe just Dread,
lurking with her black, rolling eyes, her demon mouth filled
with shotgun pellets and sweet tea rot.
I think she'd say
Bless your heart,
right before she gobbled it up.

You protect small things but I grew.
And I knew I ignored those promises for too long.

Now

Here

Someone posted a sign, jarring in its shiny modernity:
Welcome to Pleasant Valley!
There's no real welcome, pleasant or otherwise, just a few store fronts
with broken windows and determined trees
growing twisted
though cracked foundations--

Mostly it's just desolate prairie and grassland

the post office gone
the outlaws too

and of course you

Harvest

A cigarette burns in an ashtray
lipstick on the filter a yelp of red
I know it must belong to an old
woman or a young one, no one
in-between bothers

sip at my scotch

she slinks up, a gorgeous graceless
thing, pale with dark bangs
and melamine eyes, gives
me a grin, those red lips dragging
a stain on her front tooth

oh she's a rock and roller

I smile, touch my own mouth
automatic, and she understands
draws her tongue back and forth
then bares her teeth at me
and I nod, serious

yes it's gone

she rejoins her cigarette, blinks
at me through the smoke and din
like some nocturnal creature
tiny and shivery and very alive
and I lean over

she smells of fall

firewood, apples and clove
I wince with sudden comfort
she will have Violent Femmes
records and she will touch
my cheeks with her thumbs

tender and kind

Ardor is Arson

I'd rather be an arsonist than a lover.
I'm better in an immediate crisis, better in all black,
silhouetted against a billowing conflagration.
(The conditions are right, no wind tonight, no moon.)
A book of matches or a bottle of wine,
it makes no difference in the end,
the outcome is the same:
someone is without a home
someone is left with sadness
that clings like a smoldering scent,
eats all the air in here, in the between.

It seems I am burning my house down and giving you the ashes.